

U.S. Army Captains -
Unprepared for Tomorrow's Challenges
EWS Contemporary Issue Paper
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to
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The orders are passed down from the Battalion to the company commander; the mission is to defend objective bravo in order to deny the enemy the ability to penetrate the Battalion's rear area. The commander receives the mission, summons his platoon leaders, and reissues the order. From the outside, this appears to be a normal evolution for the preparation and execution of orders; unfortunately that is not the case because the commander lacks the academic background and experience due to a prolonged war that is straining the Army to the breaking point. Without the knowledge and experience, today's U.S. Army captains are not as well prepared for duties as company commanders as they need to be. To ensure captains are prepared to command, the U.S. Army should establish and implement a mandatory non-branch specific career-level planning school and increase the promotion timeline to 48 months time in service with at 18 months as a platoon leader followed by at least 12 months on a battalion level or higher staff.

Officer Education System

Currently the Army's only promotion requirement from captain to major is the completion of a captain's career course (CCC) (or sister service equivalent). Every captain is routinely scheduled to attend educational training between their fifth and seventh year of commissioned service.¹ To ensure that all captains trained under the officer education system are prepared for command, the U.S. Army need to develop a curriculum that incorporates all of the basic branches into a comprehensive planning school which focuses on all of the battlefield operating systems (BOS) equally.² This program of instruction should focus on the military decision making process (MDMP) as

¹ Human Resources Command Website, Aviation Branch, December 16, 2007

² Battlefield Operating System (BOS) are the functions that are performed by the Army to ensure that the single battle concept is integrated at all levels. BOS are similar to the U.S. Marine Corps' Warfighting Functions.

it applies to all elements of the BOS. This is an absolute must as the Army continues its transformation into self-sufficient, plug and play brigade combat teams capable of independent operations across the full spectrum of military conflicts.

Essentially there are three problems with the current education system. The first is that not all captains receive the same education and training. The second is that the Army is putting an extremely high amount of focus on the current operating environment; specifically counter-insurgency operations. Lastly, "The U.S. Army, struggling to cope with stepped up deployments of its soldiers to Iraq, has shortened the duration of several of its bedrock training courses".³

As of the first quarter of fiscal year 2008, the Army operates 16 basic branch captain's career courses across the officer education system.⁴ This poses a problem because not all captains are being trained in the same manner and on the same topics. While the majority of the program of instruction is issued by the Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC)⁵, the way in which the different schools present the material and the amount of time allotted for each topic/course vary by branch. There is

³ Bryan Bender, "Army cuts time spent on training, Aims to bolster front lines quickly," *The Boston Globe*, August 19, 2007, sec. Foreign, pg A1.

⁴ 16 basic branches include infantry, armor, artillery, aviation, engineer, military police, intelligence, signal, chemical, transportation, quartermaster, ordnance, adjutant general, finance, medical service, and air defense artillery.

⁵ Training & Doctrine Command is the Army's principal training and education agency, similar to the U.S. Marine Corps Training and Education Command.

a program currently being evaluated which will combine the infantry and armor captains career courses together to establish a combined maneuver career course. This is a step in the right direction, but does not incorporate the rest of the branches.

Since the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) began six years ago, the Army has placed a significant emphasis on the training and execution of counterinsurgency operations (COIN). While COIN is immensely important to be taught and understood, the Army has started to drift away from teaching the other elements of military operations. Army officials have "acknowledged that it is becoming increasingly difficult to prepare them for all the mission they are assigned, such as tank crews and artillery battalions that are participating in patrols and COIN operations."⁶

The current operational tempo of active and reserve forces has caused TRADOC to make some adjustments to the curriculum as stated in an article published last fall: "Newly promoted captains now take a Captains Career Course, designed to prepare them to be company commanders or battalion or brigade staff officers, for a little less than five months, lopping three months from the normal eight month curriculum."⁷ Although the Army will continue to make the adjustments necessary to meet the

⁶ Bender, pg A1.

⁷ Bender, pg A2.

manpower requirements of units deploying in support both Operations Iraqi and Enduring Freedom, it is at a serious detriment to the education and training of its junior officer corps. This war will not last forever, and the captains of today will be the colonels of tomorrow requiring a well rounded education that incorporates all aspects of BOS and mission types.

By combining all basic branch captains career courses into one program of instruction with a focus on the MDMP as it applies to all types of military operations (COIN, total war, humanitarian, peacekeeping, etc), the Army will ensure that captains are prepared to take command of a company and lead it successfully. As a guide, TRADOC should develop a course that resembles the Expeditionary Warfare School (equivalent to an Army captains career course) taught at the Marine Corps University. This curriculum prepares students with critical thinking skills and ensures they understand and can plan and execute all missions required of the Marine Air Ground Task Force. A similar type of education is absolutely critical to make certain that the Army's captains are trained and ready to be an integral part of a staff at any type of brigade combat team.

Promotion Timelines

As the war on terrorism continues and officer attrition becomes more apparent and alarming, the Human Resources Command (HRC) continues adjusting the promotion standards and timelines to meet manpower and unit needs. This alarming problem gained national attention in the press last year when a headline in the *Boston Globe* stated: "To fill a growing number of vacancies in the officer corps, the Army is promoting captains, majors, and lieutenant colonels more quickly and at a higher percentage than before the Iraq war."⁸ The current policy is to promote first lieutenants to captain at the 39 month mark.⁹ While this policy meets the manning requirements for the deploying units it poses long term problems for the Army. First, officers typically arrive at their units as first lieutenants and do not have the time available to mature as leaders before promotion to captain. Secondly, with the higher operational tempo, more officers are leaving the Army at the end of their first service obligation (3 years for Officer Candidate School, 4 years for ROTC graduates, and 5 years for Academy graduates). The resulting attrition rate is forcing the Army to promote nearly all of the eligible officers in a targeted year group to the next grade with little

⁸ Bryan Bender, "Army rushes to promote its officers-War pressures cited; quality is a concern", *The Boston Globe*, March 13, 2007, National Sec, pg A1.

⁹ Human Resources Command, Promotions FAQ, 16 December 2007.

to no competition or selectiveness. Not only does the operational tempo and ongoing war on terror influence the quality and quantity of the Army's officer corps, the demands of deploying units' timelines are causing a greater number of captains to take command without attending a captains career course first.

The Army has made significant progress in the initial training of its officer corps with the addition of the Basic Officer Leadership Course (BOLC). BOLC is designed to expand the knowledge base of newly commissioned officers. While it accomplishes initial training requirements, it diminishes a portion of the time that an officer gets to spend in an operational unit as a lieutenant. After BOLC, officers then have to attend their respective officer basic course (which range anywhere from 8-18 months) and any follow-on schools (such as Airborne, Ranger, etc). These schools combine to allow for a new officer only 12-16 months in an operational unit prior to promotion to captain. This shortage of time has a direct impact on the amount of development that a young officer receives, as well as the establishment and maturation process of his/her leadership style. By extending the promotion point to the 48th month of commissioned service, officers will be able to spend at least 18 months in a key developmental position (platoon leader or detachment officer in charge). This will enable them to have

the time required to learn how to operate in their basic branch and to lead Soldiers successfully. To further prepare lieutenants for success as commanders they need to serve at least 12 months on a battalion or higher staff to gain an understanding of the orders process and how that larger unit integrates into the combined arms team.

As previously stated, the Army is being forced to meet manning requirements aggravated not only by higher junior officer attrition, but the need to fill a greater number of billets in each of the transformed brigade combat teams and a higher Army end strength. The Army's promotion goal is approximately the top 80% of eligible lieutenants to captain each year, but in 2006 the Army advanced nearly 100% to meet emerging manning needs.¹⁰ The purpose of the centralized promotion system is to screen and attrite the underachieving officers, but due to the high operational tempo and increased manning requirements, these officers are promoted and allowed to stay in to fill the gap. At first glance, the Army is meeting its end strength requirements, but these new (and sometimes unqualified) captains are taking command of companies to the detriment of the Army as a whole.

As the Army struggles to meet the demands of the operational units' deployment schedule, the number of captains

¹⁰ Bender, "Army rushes to promote its officers-War pressures cited; quality is a concern"

taking command at the company level without attendance at a CCC is growing steadily. Prior to the GWOT, this was the exception, not the rule. While attendance at CCC is not necessarily a precursor to a successful command, it can potentially be a tremendous shortfall. Although a CCC is not the ultimate solution, it does allow captains to be exposed to different situations and problems that may be encountered therefore better preparing them for company command.

Conclusion

As the Army continues to meet its manning requirements for units in support of deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, its captains are not prepared academically or experientially to assume duties as company commanders. Through an overhauled officer education system which focuses on critical thinking, cross MOS training, and all types of warfare, captains will have the knowledge base to be prepared. In addition to an overhauled education system, the Army needs to extend the promotion timeline. By spending extra time in units, captains will develop as strong leaders and trainers. By instituting these

changes the Army will be able to provide the best qualified and trained captains to lead their companies today and battalions tomorrow.

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